

Head of French church child abuse probe says possibly 10,000 victims



The file photo shows a French Catholic Church on the outskirts of the capital, Paris.

Paris, March 4 (RHC)-- The head of an independent inquiry investigating church child abuse in France said Tuesday that there might have been at least 10,000 victims since 1950. Jean-Marc Sauve, head of a commission set up by the Catholic Church, said that a previous estimate in June last year of 3,000 victims "is certainly an underestimate."

"It's possible that the figure is at least 10,000," he added at a press conference where he delivered an update on the commission's work. A hotline set up in June 2019 for victims and witnesses to report abuse received 6,500 calls in the first 17 months of operation.

"The big question for us is 'how many victims came forward'? Is it 25 percent? 10 percent, five percent or less?" Sauve told reporters.

The Bishops' Conference of France agreed in November 2018 to set up the commission after huge and repeated child abuse scandals shook the Catholic Church at home and abroad. The move sparked mixed reactions from victims' associations at the time, who applauded attempts to encourage survivors to speak out, but questioned French prosecutors' willingness and ability to press charges.

Reacting to the new estimate on Tuesday, several victims' associations said they suspected that even 10,000 was an underestimate. "It's the tip of the iceberg, it's certainly even more," said Veronique Garnier from the group Faith and Resilience.

"10,000 is a lot but it's the bottom of the scale. We're far from the truth," said Jean-Pierre Sautreau, who heads a victims' group in the Vendee region in western France.

The commission, comprised of more than 20 figures drawn from legal, academic and medical backgrounds, was originally scheduled to deliver a final report by the end of 2020 but has set a new deadline of September this year.

Sauve said the final report would present "broad conclusions" which would seek to answer the question of "how we got here, beyond the failings and individual crimes of priests and religious figures." Allegations against priests and senior Catholic figures have led to pay-outs and prosecutions worldwide, as well as changes to church doctrine.

In 2019, a French court gave the archbishop of Lyon, Philippe Barbarin, a six-month suspended jail sentence for covering up for a priest, Bernard Preynat, who was accused of assaulting around 70 scouts between 1986 and 1991.

Barbarin's conviction was overturned on appeal in 2020, but the Pope accepted his resignation. Preynat was given a five-year jail term in 2020.

In May 2019, Pope Francis passed a landmark new measure obliging anyone in the Church who knew about sex abuse to report it to their superiors.

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